A WITCH'S FATE.

The Terrible Punishment Inflicted by Zulus on a Young Girl of Their Tribe.

Tied to a Tree, Her Body Smeared With Honey, and Left a Prey to the Ants.

A Graphically Depicted Incident of Travel in South Africa—Abataki, the Spell Worker.

There was a strange story in Zululand, dating before the time that Cetewayo, the last king, began his reign, says an English exchange. It was in this wise:

Chaka (the greatuncle of Cetewayo) was killed by his own brothers, and as he lay dying he is reported to have said these words to them: "You hope to be kings, but though you kill me, think not your reign shall be long. I tell you that I hear the sound of the feet of the great white people, and that this land shall be trodden by them"—words which have been looked upon as a prohecy by the Zulus.

Physically the Zulus are the finest race of Kaffirs in South Africa; they can endure great fatigue, are brave in war, and further advanced in a rude form of civilization than their northern neighbors, the Amaswazi and the Amatongas. It was for their benefit that Colenso translated the Bible into the soft-sounding Zulu. Two grammars were also published, one by the bishop, the other by Louis Crout, an American missionary. The missionary work in Zululand is now largely supplemented by native Zulu teachers, who read to their own people in their own language. In the schools, especially those established at the town of Colenso, on the Tugela, they are taught trades, and the young women plain sewing and such simple home duties as may tend to make their future lives bright and cheerful, in place of squalor and degrading customs.

We left Colenso in the company of a Dutch trader going up country with calico, beads and knives to barter for ivory and hides. In two days we reached Umvoti. The Umvoti mission station, where the American missionaries live, is built on the bosom of a mountain, overlooking a lovely and picturesque valley; at one's feet the shining river, beyond the open country, bush, plain and volcanic range of hills. At the mission station we found substantially built mud huts, with overhanging thatched roofs and shaded by fine trees. The huts were kept very tidily, some having glass windows and whitewashed walls, and each a small garden with patches of melon, Kaffir corn and fruit trees. It was in such contrast with what followed later that we remembered and looked back to this little village of contentment, order and prosperity. Here the Zulus lived and worked. Many of them, it is true, were men who had fled from Zululand proper on account of oppressions and superstitious cruelties, bringing with them their wives and their little ones; others were men who still maintained a kind of relation with their nation, and who, from time to time, visited at the great tribal meetings. It seems a mistake to have permitted this wavering allegiance; it was serving two masters, and these men were the hardest to recirim, as once away among their own people they discarded their clothes and with them their Christianity, falling back into the orgies, the customs and cruelties still permitted and encouraged by the "head men." The Germans have the name of being the most successful missionaries, because, unlike the English and Americans, they do not at once attempt to convert a man who has lived all his life in barbarism into a brand new Christian: instead of that they direct their attention to teaching them the arts of civilization, and then later make the attempt to inculcate the faith. After all, it is the children with whom the missionaries of all denominations do the best work, and the most lasting.

After leaving this peaceful village on the Umvoti river, we crossed the river at a "draft," and still traveling northwards, in a couple of days again reached the Tugela, and fording this now wide river, we were at last in Zululand proper, among a brave people, but also among a people full of superstitions and the cruelties engendered of vile beliefs. The story of terrible torture I have to tell at once illustrates a Zulu custom and the uphill work of the missionarius to destroy the ancient laws binding them.

When my friend Cyril Wood and I left Umvoti with Hertzogg, the Dutch trader, we had ten Kaffirs with us, bullock drivers and servants, two large wagons and twenty span of oxen. Shortly after crossing the river we met two Zulus traveling alone the elder wearing a black ring fastened to his hair, a sign of manhood, also denoting the wearer to be a warrior and the son of a chief. Strangers, whether black or white, never pass each other in the wilds of Africa without a long parley, and after some conversation this man offered himself to me as a servant, professed to know the country well, to have accompanied other traders, and to have always proved himself a reliant guide. Hertzogg questioned the man, approved of him, and I accepted him, agreeing to pay him five shillings a week and find him in food. The ludicrous part of the arrangement was this, whatever work I set him to do, he consigned to the care of the youth who accompanied him. When I asked Hertzogg the meaning of it, I learned that Umbarki, my new servant, did not demean himself by work, being the son of a chief, but that his young follower acted for him.

We arrived one moonlight night on the outskirts of a large native "kraal," and were soon encamped with all our belongings under a clump of giant mimosa trees.

Contrary to their usual custom, all our Kaffirs remained close to the wagons instead of gathering aroung the glowing fire, singing their impromptu songs, smoking their "daccha" pipes, as they invariably did when the long, weary day's work of "trekking" and "inspanning" was over.

Hertzogg called Umbarki to him—we knew he had been into the town whose round topped huts we could see stretching from the upland by the river to the adjacent hillside.

"Shall we not trade here?" asked Hertzogg in Dutch. "Have the people deserted that they are so silent?"

"Baas," replied Umbarki, "this is the kraal of Pambeli, the great Induna. His son has been bewitched and is dead. Tomorrow the diviners will smell out the 'sbataki' who has caused it."

To digress for a moment: The Zulus are completely under the power of the witch-doctors. They believe thoroughly in bad men and women who go about causing sickness and death; they believe that these "abataki" go about at night accompanied by their familiars (wildcats and baboons) and lay poison in the paths for people to step over and on the thresholds and in the fields to destroy crops—thus sickness and death are attributed to the magic and malice of the "abataki." Belief in these matters still clings to the natives after embracing Christianity.

For a purpose that I afterwards understood, the Dutchman inspanned long before daylight and passed to the other side of the town, getting into the up-country track so as to be ready to start without hindrance. We were seen and spoken to as we passed the kraal, and Pambeli sent a message that we were to stay a day over and trade with such as he appointed on the morrow. In the course of the next day all the people gather in the square before Pambeli's house, a mass of silent quaking men and women, for none knew whom the diviners would convict. Pambeli himself sat silent and sorrow-stricken in the doorway of his hut; before him, the witch-finders.

There were three hideous and revolting men wearing various charms upon their filthy bodies, rows of gleaming teeth round their necks, dried toads, with the eyes of animal and snake skins tied to their waists, and a quantity of clanking metal bracelets on ankles and arms.

After some preliminary incantations these three men suddenly leaped forward and commenced their work of "smelling out." Round and round the great circle formed by the people they ran, sometimes slowly with cunning gravity, sometimes with almost incredible swiftness, forever crying out one word—"Eswa"—and all the people repeating it after them, sometimes loudly—then it was dangerous—then whispering it, crying it over and over again, running, dancing, yelling, until the witch finders, steaming with perspiration, had lashed themselves into a state of hysterical fury, shouting and shrieking with the wildest contortions of face and limb, till, after one tornado of final violence, they swooped with the rapidity of eagles upon one startled girl, touched her with a forked stick and cried "Eswa" at their loudest, while the cowering crowd breathed freer the next moment, and then repeated the fatal word in one last overwhelming shout.

It was all over, the trial was finished, the victim selected, and nought remained but the penalty to be pronounced. At the supreme moment of selection the people dropped away on either side, and the girl stood alone, the focus of all eyes. After one fearful glance all around, after one second of intense rigidity, the woman fell forward in a stupor of pitiable terror. It was a sight no man could ever forget.

When those appointed by the witch-doctors touched her she rose shrieking and struggling, but seeing—probably knowing—the hopelessness of it all, she fell again at their feet.

Cyril Wood, his hand on his revolver, started forward, but Hertzogg grasped his arm and held him, and then the crowd surged upon us and crushed us back until we found ourselves near the outside circle of huts again.

There were tears in Cyril's eyes, and his face was hot with anger, as he exclaimed: "Can nothing be done?"

"My friend," said the Dutch trader, "listen to me; there are 10,000 here, and there are three of us." Wood turned abruptly away, and we followed him to the wagons.

Nobody came near us all that day, and I found the Dutchman discussing with Umbarki the necessity of "trekk ny" onwards, but the Kaffir counseled our remaining; to him the events of the day had been but a custom that Zulu justice authorized; on the morrow all would be forgotten.

Late that night one of our Kaffir lads—an English-speaking mission boy called Tom Oupe—came in and told us the woman had been taken to the woods, bound to a tree, her body smeared all over with wild honey, a small train of it thickly laid near a white ants' nest, and left. When the moon crept above the tops of the trees Wood and I arose, buckled on our revolvers and cartridge belts and signaled Oupe quietly.

Once clear of the camp and sleeping Kaffirs, we told Oupe to go before us to the place where the girl had been taken. Our friend the trader knew of our project and had been persuaded to hide the girl in the wagon and start away at once. The air was still and heavy, and the night full of the cries of animals and the singing of tree crickets. We knew none of the natives would be in the vicinity for the reason that Tom Oupe, mission-bred as he was, begged us not to make him go quite up to the place where the young woman was bound, because "the Tongas (spirits of dead ancestors) would be there waiting."

After going about a mile, the boy crouched and pointed, and Wood and I went forward alone.

There was a partial clearing in the forest and through the trees we could see the plain beyond, then a passing cloud drifted by and obscured the light. We two men stood close together and waited with our revolvers in our hands. Nowhere does the moon seem to shine with such wonderful radiance as in Africa.

When the light showed again we crept forward. All at once Cyril gave an inarticulate cry of horror and dismay; he was covered with thousands of crawling things, slimy millions were creeping at our feet, and there before us—in the white splendor of the moonlight—was the poor girl's body tied at the foot of a tree, eaten to death by ants.

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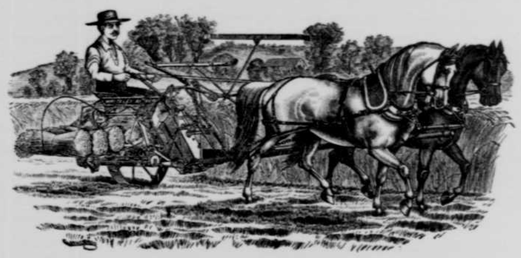

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